

and they would have had one hell of a time  
pulling it out.

— Knute Skinner

Bellingham WA

#### THE SPIRIT OF THE LETTER

Clarity is the virtue they exhibit.  
For one thing, they're not written but printed.  
This is not a case of chance or habit.  
It is entirely purposeful and concerted:  
That there be no mistake of what they mean.  
Like Shaker chairs, it's unadorned and plain.

The stationery is always the same:  
White (not off white). Standard letter size.  
The ink is blue. Exactness is the aim.  
The principle: If something's true, it never varies.  
Another way: Get it right, it stays right.  
The fold of the letter is always tri-partite.

My mother has a sense of humor, so  
These letters aren't without it. I'd color-code  
It light brown. Its shape is an eyebrow.  
Lifted. When written out, it's an aside  
(Parenthetical and often concerning  
Money) (that somebody's got and is burning).

Family gossip is my mother's great love  
To which she applies her three subsidiary  
Loves in the spirit of the problem-solve:  
Math, bookkeeping, chemistry.  
Siblings are equations. One's character  
Must balance. People explode in laughter or anger.

Family is dying. Numbers are pure — but people?  
The figure 1 is perfect, but one's figure  
Hardly is. These letters end a chronicle.  
Adjustment must be made for turnover.  
But while others undergo degeneration  
My mother's eye is still sharp — and open.

#### UNFASHIONABLE ADMISSION

"Nothing! They couldn't answer a single question.  
They just sat there — Duh! Wuh! ..." He grits his teeth,  
Squeezes his face in tension, or derision.  
"How long have you been in Japan?" I ask.



"Three months," he says. A cold night, Tokyo. We've both Just finished teaching. Our walk is brisk.

We stop at a coffee shop. "Next class," he says "I'll be better prepared. Look —" he breaks off, "You're an old timer. You must know some ways To handle these things. You've been around ...." Yes, I've been around. I do a little riff. Drum my fingers. I'm an old Japan hand.

Our coffee arrives. The waitress smiles and weaves Among the tables. The world got younger on Me in Japan. "Well, no one achieves Anything here right away," I say. "You don't have to make a big impression. In Japan, steady is better than flashy."

He agrees, but it's hard to shake it. I think Back on my first days here. Everything familiar But unfamiliar. Feeling you're on the brink Of something, but never there. Unsure of just What's wrong. "The class was a total failure," He says, "A table of blank faces. Complete waste."

He picks up the sugar spoon, turns it over. And over. In fact, I wonder if he'll make it. Will he have the energy to persevere? Virtue here is a kind of sublime stubbornness. Always trudging back. But is it worth it? Hardly what you'd call a quick-yeild course.

I ask him why he came. "The Pacific Rim Is the place to be," he says. "The Orient Is history. A mind set." But for him? "Teaching in Japan is hands-on experience." I look outside. A north wind. People bent Against the cold. Some plastic flowers dance.

"Can you give me any tips? Any angles? Things I should know?" I really can't, no — Except that there really are no angles. That's what Japan's about: no short cuts. Everything's step by step ... A light snow Is beginning to fall. He looks out. Frets.

But since he is young, I want to be helpful. "Japan wears most of us Westerners down. That's going to be your biggest challenge. Most people Waste a lot of energy fighting it." "Yeah, like that class today. Don't want to burn Out ...." No, not before you even start.



It's getting late. The waitress comes to collect.  
We pay and leave. Head for the station.  
"So you like teacking?" he asks. I reflect  
On it and then I say, almost to myself,  
"No, I love it." Unfashionable admission,  
But there it is. Teaching's been my life.

— Michael Fessler

Kanagawa-ken Japan

M'LADY

M'Lady Ocean. Her name is Melady O'Shane, but he calls her M'Lady Ocean.

M'Lady Ocean. The first time he called her that they were pressed together in his single bed, warm and close enough to sleep they could not distinguish the borders of their bodies. He called her M'Lady Ocean and she smiled and her teeth sparkled in the shine of the night. She turned her head to him and she asked him what he meant. He kept his eyes closed and shook his head as he smiled with her. He told her that lying next to her was like lying on a dark beach, watching lightning over a horizon of water. When she asked, he could not tell her why. He just said that sometimes she was overwhelming in a way that bordered on fear.

Pj has lived in California and thinks he knows the ocean. Because Melady has told him her measurements, that she sucked her thumb until she was nine and that she masturbates, Pj thinks he knows all of her secrets. She smokes for Pj because she knows he likes to see her with a cigarette, she once let Pj take pictures of her body, and she stays with him despite his impotency. For these reasons he believes she has top billing in his melodrama.

Pj thinks he knows the ocean but forgets there is more of the sea beyond and below the horizon of his view. For example, he does not know that Melady watches daytime television when she's home alone. He doesn't know where she buys her clothes or that she likes to ride escalators and push the buttons in elevators. That she is careful of cracks when she walks on sidewalks. That she doesn't like horror films, heavy metal, or chinese food as much as she claims. That she gives money to street musicians and once dropped a ten dollar bill in the lap of a man in a wheelchair blowing sax. That she thinks she's too nice.